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XXXVII.—*Letters, Extracts, and Notes.*

**The Last Phase of the Subspecies.**

SIR,—The student entering upon the study of systematic ornithology to-day will find much diversity of opinion respecting the status of the subspecies. One author would have “practical subspecies,” another “sane subspecies,” and another, subspecies *ad infinitum*. One would partially suppress subspecies by placing their names beneath bold specific captions, and another would eliminate subspecific names from captions and make “pronouncements” in the body of the text. After nearly half a century of the theory and practice of subspeciation, the result is this confusion of tongues. The cause is not far to seek; for the subspecies is the outcome of incomplete investigation.

At the outset conspicuous geographic variations were mistaken for constant characters and described as species. When larger series were available for study, the mistake was partially discovered, and the apocryphal species were demoted to the rank of varieties. Later, the term variety was superseded by the term subspecies. It was assumed that geographic variations are incipient species. There is no valid reason for such an assumption. We are not endowed with the gift of prophecy, and can not foretell the remote future of any variation having evolutionary possibilities. It matters not whether the variation be geographic, dichromatic, or individual. Moreover, it is not known how existing bird species were evolved. The manner of the unfolding is lost in the mists of the past.

Dichromatic variations (possible saltations) have also fared ill at the hands of systematists. Many such variations have been described as species. Some of them were ultimately identified as colour phases of species. Others, because of differences in the geographic distribution of phases and lack of correlation with environmental conditions, were relegated to the category of intergrading species.

In nature, fundamental bird units abound. The individuals composing these units possess a peculiar assemblage of characters, an assemblage that absolutely separates them from all other bird individuals. These units are conventionally styled species. Called by any other name, they would be as real. Geographic and dichromatic variations are inconstant variations within bird units. If trinomial or binomial names are applied to these variations, a false impression of unity is conveyed that is difficult to expel from the mind when once entertained. In short, no magic words or question-begging phrases can make geographic and dichromatic variations units.

It has often been urged that the subspecies theory is a convenient scheme for handling geographic variations and an important aid in tracing migration routes. One has only to read a recent systematic monograph of a bird group, treated on the subspecies basis, to learn that the author has

entered an interminable maze from which there is no escape save to retreat and recognize all inconstant variations as variations of species units. Furthermore, in the study of bird migration, it is not trinomial, but the fact of geographic variation that aids in determining migration routes.

Engineers tell us that the strength of a structure is primarily the strength of its foundation. The foundation of the subspecies is an unstable variation, and in consequence the structure is collapsing. Hasten the day when we shall view its ruins with the same complacency as we view the ruins of the Quinary System.

Yours truly,

San Francisco,

26 July, 1920.

LEVERETT MILLS LOOMIS, F.A.O.U.

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#### Birds of Texel.

SIR,—To the list of birds found in Texel contained in Dr. C. B. Ticehurst's valuable paper (*Ibis*, 1920, p. 361) I can add four species. On the 8th of May, 1907, I saw a Hoopoe on the wing. A (very) Mealy Redpoll (apparently a female) was feeding in some willows, eating the catkins or something on them, on the 19th of May, 1908. I saw three Black-winged Stilts on one of the meres near the west coast (where they had been seen the day before) on the 14th of May, 1907; and on the same day, on an adjoining mere, I spent some time watching a pair of Black-necked or Eared Grebes, which I have no doubt were nesting, or going to nest, in a big but thin reed-bed. They were in full summer dress, and, to judge from the many times the ordinary cry of *blidder* was uttered from the inside of the reed-bed, as well as by the birds I watched, I thought there were more Eared Grebes there.

As to the birds mentioned in the paper referred to, I should like to say that I saw Crested Larks in two places near Hoorn on the 25th of May, 1908, and had no doubt that this sedentary species was breeding there, although I

did not find a nest. The Stonechat is a probable breeder. I saw it on heath-land on the 12th of May, 1907. With regard to the Sandwich Tern breeding, I saw in the Museum at the Amsterdam Diergarten eggs taken in Texel as long ago as May 1890.

Yours truly,

O. V. APLIN.

Bloxham, Oxon,

20 August, 1920.

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### Special Meeting of the Union.

Members are reminded that a Special General Meeting of the Union will be held at Pagani's Restaurant, Great Portland Street, at 6 P.M. on Wednesday, the 13th of October next, to consider the recommendation of the Committee that the subscription to the Union be raised from 25s. per annum to £2 per annum.

Members of the Union who are not members of the Club are invited to join in the dinner which will be held the same evening at the same place at 7 P.M. The dinner is 6s. 6d., without wine.